Compassionate/Dispassionate Woman : Representations of Female Sexuality in the Novels by the Female Wits

Compassionate / Dispassionate Women: Representations of Female Sexuality in the Novels by the Female Wits

Riwako Kaji

I

In April 1689, Aphra Behn, who wrote prolifically as the first professional woman playwright for the Restoration stages, was buried at the Poets' Corner in Westminster Abbey. Through exposing female sexuality and utilizing sexual images, Behn came to be regarded as a talented author who revolutionalised the theatrical world; as Susan Staves observes her "success as a commercial playwright . . . challenged the male hegemony over public performance and over writing for publication" (61). However, she was severely criticised and often satirically compared to a prostitute by her contemporary dramatists such as William Wycherley.[1] Several years after her death, Behn's name and works boomed in the 1695/96 theatrical season. Her prose work *Oroonoko,* dramatized by Thomas Southerne, gained great popularity,[2] and her last play *The Younger Brother* was acted around February 1696, probably due to the notably successful performance of *Oroonoko* (Aphra Behn, Vol.7, 357-58).

Around the same time, as if stimulated by her revival or aiming to inherit her mantle, four female "playwrights" entered the theatre with attempts to relate themselves somehow to Behn openly.[3] "Ariadne (a young lady)," an unidentified author, claims to be a successor of "the incomparable Mrs Behn" in the preface of *She Ventures and He Wins*, performed in September 1695 (Ariadne 105). Catharine Trotter's first play, *Agnes de Castro*, acted in December 1695, was an adaptation from a French fiction translated by Behn under the same title. Delarivier Manley's first play, *The Lost Lover*, probably acted

in March 1696, was definitely influenced by Behn's greatest hit, *The Rover* (1677) in its characterization and framing of the plot. Mary Pix, who "would have seen production of Behn's plays and may have known Behn herself" (Kendall 31), calls herself "Defenceless Foe" in the epilogue of her first play, *Ibrahim*, probably acted in June 1696, which indicates her intentional emphasis on the weakness of female pen as Behn did before.[4] Their direct or indirect references to Behn were followed by their mutual references in their dramatic texts published soon after their performances.[5] By mutually mentioning their creative activities, for example "*Like* Sappho *Charming, like* Afra *Eloquent, / Like Chast* Orinda, *sweetly Innocent,*" they try to advance the claim that the women's plays were worthy of "*Everlasting Praise*" (Manley, *The Royal Mischief*, 51-52). In their references to Sappho, Aphra Behn and Orinda (that is, Katherine Philips), we could see their intention to establish a brand image of female writers with "Aphra Behn" at the centre and place their works into that lineage.

Recent literary critics have generally analyzed these women writers in relation to the works of Behn. Susan Staves points out "Pix's dramatic career owed much to the example of Behn's success, and her tragedies continued to feature lurid assaults on female virtue" (117).[6] For Trotter "hedonism and libertinism usually led to female suffering" as Behn's work had shown, while "Manley most obviously followed Behn . . . in writing political fiction" and "in her construction of a narrative authority based on a woman's knowledge, especially knowledge of love" (Susan Staves 92; 129). These three women, often called "the Female Wits" due to the name of the satirical play,[7] seemingly debuted as dramatists, but they actually began their literary creations before as authors of epistolary novels.[8] While literary critics have comparatively discussed their dramatic texts, their first epistolary novels have been paid little attention.[9] However, to reconsider how they develop female representations concerning female sexuality, it would be useful to examine their first published novels. In this paper, the Female Wits will be reconsidered not as a group of female dramatists, but as writers who make use of or produce variations from Behn's representations of female sexuality. First, the characteristics of epistolary novels in the Restoration period will be investigated to make clear why they chose this genre for their first attempts to be writers. Then, the different ways they utilize the form and contents of the epistolary novel will be analyzed, by which similarities and differences among these women writers will be clarified, who intentionally related

themselves to Aphra Behn—a woman playwright called a prostitute—and who were ironically called "the Female Wits," but no longer called prostitutes.

II

Epistolary novels became popular in England from the late seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century, especially because "the letter's openness and flexibility, and . . . its indeterminate position between public and private spheres" were very favourable "for women writers" (Clare Blant 296). In order to inquire about the situation of the epistolary novel as a literary genre when the Female Wits published their works, the publisher's words in *Letters of Love and Gallantry* will be informative.[10] This collection of "letters" was published by Samuel Briscoe in 1693, claiming "*All Written by Ladies*," though many women's letters are considered to have been probably written by male authors in reality (Clare Blant 286; Lori Humphrey Newcomb 283-84). Whether it was written by women or men, we could see the publisher thought it important for selling to make an assertion that letters were written by women. In the following message from Briscoe to the reader in the first volume, we could understand how this businessman paid attention to the marketable value of women's letters in the publishing world:

> The Report of my going to Print the Adventures of *Olinda*, written by her self, in some Letters to a Friend, having Rais'd an Emulation in some other Ladies, several others were sent me by the Penny Post in unknown Hands. . . . I Resolved to Print 'em in another Volume not doubting in the least but the Ladies Letters will meet with a very favourable Reception, since Letters are so much in Vogue. (Trotter, *The Adventure of a Young Lady*, "To the Reader")

Though we cannot judge whether Olinda is an actual woman or a fictional figure, it was certain that "women's letters"—written or fabricated by women (or men)—were so fashionable as motivating female (or male) readers into writing them. As the form of epistolary novel can naturally or intentionally obscure the boundary between reality and fictionality, the publisher's affirmation that these letters are real could make readers assume that female letters can be widely distributed in publishing circles and that (supposed to be) women's

interest or concerns can be accepted favourably or understood sympathetically when disclosed in letters.

Stimulating readers' curiosities about women's interest or desire was regarded as a highly effective approach available for publishers or booksellers in the 1690s.[11] It might be doubtful to take into account this "favourable" reception literally, but, from this publisher's statement, we could suppose that the works of letters in women's hands, or women's epistolary novels could gain considerable popularity, favourable or unfavourable, at the end of the century. Briscoe's claim that "women's letters" are in fashion was clearly confirmed, as the second volume of *Letters of Love and Gallantry* was published next year. In these "letters," popular topics were not only passionate love stories but also such conflicting oppositions as reason versus love, which we can see in its subtitles such as "a dialogue between love and reason," or "other passionate letters, that passed betwixt both sexes, in town and country." Among these topics, we will examine woman's inner conflicts, especially between passionate love and rational thought, in order to clarify their functions in epistolary novels quite popular in the late seventeenth century.

This vogue of letters purported to be written by women was triggered by *Letters of a Portuguese Nun (Les Lettres portugaises)* (1669), which was published in France and translated into several languages. In England, Roger L'Estrange translated it as *Five Love-Letters from a Nun to a Cavalier* in 1678.[12] Five letters from a nun to a cavalier are designed to be read as written by a "real" nun in Portugal whose lover, a French officer, forsook her in his return to France. The supposed author's complaints about her lover's dismissiveness and emotional entanglements are revealed in a monologue that "introduced a new language to amatory fiction" (Ballaster 63). Through examining this amorous epistolary fiction, we can see what makes "women's letters" so popular or why the Portuguese nun becomes one of the "patterns of feminine desire" in the following women's writing (Clare Blant 287).

The female narrator of *Five Love-Letters* presents herself as a woman distressed by her ardent love and extreme passion to the cavalier, but he has no cause for being distressed, since their physical separation does not evoke passion in him: "the Passion, which on my side, took up all the faculties of my soul, and Body, was only excited on your part by some loose Pleasures, and that they were to live and die together" ([26], 20). Contrary to the male addressee, the female

narrator reveals that "phancies" of her love enhances the passion for him in a distance and, as a result, her mind and body are so severly at odds that makes her ill. To make matters worse, her dysfunctional condition or disease will be deteriorated by her willingly regarding the "Remedy"—to stop loving him—as "worse then[sic] the disease" ([28], 22). "[P]hancies" or fictional power might make her run into such a dead end with no escape that the woman comes to write at last "only to divert, and entertain [her] self" ([86], 81, sig. E5-[87], 82). The female narrator discloses that she is so much ruled by the power of fiction that she still stays in her amorous suffering, though she no longer needs her lover. In other words, she enjoys narcissistically her distressful or pitiable condition, where she can be devoted to her romantic thoughts all alone in writing about her sufferings, and where her romantic imagination reinforces her "tragic" world strongly enough to enable her to be immersed in. In the last letter, the narrator reviews and explains her unreasonable conduct incited by her unbridled passion:

> I have Lov'd you to the very Loss of my Reason. . . . Alas I was young, and Credulous: Cloyster'd up from a Child; and only Wonted to a rude, and disagreeable sort of People. I never knew what belong'd to fine Words, and Flatteries, till (most unfortunately) I came acquainted with you: And all the Charmes, and Beauties you so often told me of, I only look'd upon as the Obliging Mistakes of your Civility, and Bounty. ([118], 113-[120], 115)

The ground that the reason was overwhelmed by the fiction can be attributed to her ignorance, that is, her lack of knowledge about the world, since the woman was brought up and educated in the convent that usually keeps a girl aseptic and clean by protecting her from worldly temptations by "fine Words, and Flatteries" or "Charmes, and Beauties."[13] However, it ironically makes the nun a defenceless or careless woman easily charmed by a handsome officer's alluring words. Then, the convent will casually turn into a place of love and sexual pleasure, or a place like a sickroom where a woman dysfunctions due to her (fictional) passion. Paradoxically, it is not until the nun has experienced the worldly love, its sexual pleasure and distress that she recovers from her diseased condition governed by fiction, not by love. The development of the narrator's writing about her distress shows that she knows sensual delight and could no longer enjoy it with her cavalier, by which woman's fancies made her fall to the disease. Nevertheless, the woman is finally represented as enjoying to devote

herself to amorous (to be precise, licentious) thought, which indicates her coital experience (and knowledge as its result) can satisfy her sexual desire aroused in her mind. The nun's course of her distressed condition exposes that the female body and mind are sexualised in the end by her knowledge of passionate love and fictional pleasure.

A clearer or more sexual implication is given in such a comment as "a man should rather fix upon a Mistress in a Convent than any where else," since women are prevented from "a thousand fooleries, and Amusements" in the world and "perpetually Intent upon their Passion" ([105], 100). Now that the convent exposes its function as best fit for woman's pursuit of love or sexual desires, we can no longer oppose ideas of the sacred to the worldly or (sexual) innocence to experience, but we can see that they coexist everywhere and that these confusions are easily promoted by her fancies in this novel. Rather, due to its confinement, the convent becomes a more sexualised place beyond social control, which emerges as the space popularly staged in Restoration comedies, like a closet.[14] Since the last letter of a nun is concluded as "Now do I begin to Phansie that I shall not write to you again for all This; for what Necesity is there that I must be telling of you at every turn how my Pulse beats?" ([121], 116-[122], 117), a woman narrator suggests that she will be engaged in a fictional impulse, which will immerse the female body and mind in sexualised practice, as her erotic image is emphasized by her pulse beats.

In the popular theme of epistolary novels, that is, in the conflict between the reason and the passion of a woman, *Five Love-Letters* represents how the female passion is enhanced by fictions to a dangerous level, leading a woman narrator to perform sexual behaviour, which presents the possibilities to threaten social rules in the male-dominant society. Nevertheless, the novel does not emphasize the importance of reason, but ends in indicating the power of fiction and its bond with female sexuality. A dangerous possibility of sexuality in women has not been encouraged to be exposed, much less presented in the form of a woman with sexual obsession. Such a new representation of female sexuality may be one of the reasons for its great popularity in the age of the Restoration comedies, which Roger L'Estrange, as a censor, must have recognised as the readers' (and audience's) taste of the day.

*

Based on the above-mentioned features of the epistolary novel by a female narrator, Mary Pix's *The Inhumane Cardinal, or, Innocence Betray'd. A Novel* will be first closely examined, in which letters function as an important element to represent power of fancy and its relation to woman's passion and sexuality. This text was published in 1696 and "[a]fter the publication of this novel, Pix turned to writing for the stage" (Hughes, *Eighteenth-Century Women Playwrights*, xi), starting by *Ibrahim* in the same year.[15] Two evil characters play central roles in the plots: "the inhumane Cardinal" who falls in love with innocent Melora, and a villainess who, jealous of Melora's charms attracting him, makes her believe the false story that he is a usurped prince, in order to sacrifice her sexual virtue for his lustful desire. A web of lies—fictions intermingled with historically real stories—readily succeed in tricking the innocent girl and Melora's "Eye of Fancy" leads her to imagine "her self seated in a Palace, attended by persons, born above her" ([88], 81, sig. E5). We could see that the power of fiction, by which female passion is produced and enhanced, is abused by the storyteller (villainess) who fabricates the duplicitous story for the purpose of deceiving its young and innocent reader (Melora). Like a diseased nun in *Five Love-Letters*, who is captured by various fancies and imaginary passion as a result, Melora yields to her romantic impulse without rational consideration or practical judgement of the story. Melora carelessly accepts "the prince" (the wicked cardinal) and becomes pregnant, as a result of her sexualisation driven by her passion that has been produced by fictions.[16] In contrast to the nun whose passion is intensified by fancies of her own, Melora's passion is moved by the others' fictions. Through describing (female) fictions have an influence on the others and others' sexuality, Pix's novel indicates the greater power of fiction than *Five Love-Letters*.

This notion of fictions' power is quite similar to the social anxiety about female readers being harmfully affected by romances or love stories:[17] a naïve woman easily counts on some dreamy story described in writings, and, then, should carry out silly deeds that could exclude her from male-dominant society or even endanger her life as Melora ends in death. Social anxiety about woman's reading is shown as a specific embodiment in Melora, as she reads the false story, by which she falls into the fictional vision that makes her write about her passion on her body and table-book. Impregnated Melora—the body sexually written—was poisoned by the villainess and the false prince (Melora's lover), because they fear that their despicable pursuit of

pleasure at the expense of a young innocent woman might be brought to light. In addition, her passion that takes her life costs the life of a male character who feels "gentle Compassion, increas'd by Love" ([215], 208). His compassion is enhanced by seeing her slumbering with tears on her fair cheeks and secretly reading the lines she has just written in her table-book about her internalised passion, which leads him to try to rescue her but in vain, and he is sent to the Galleys by his inhuman master and tormented to death. Melora's tears and letters are surreptitiously gazed at and read by the man, by which the woman's sexualised body and mind offer some (com)passion to the eyes of the male (reader) who looks at what he usually cannot touch. Fictional force is thus represented as so powerful that it creates and incites passion which finally makes a woman sexualised and a man, who touches that female passion, sympathetic.

While Pix's heroine's tragedy shows the danger of female passion fashioned or enhanced by others' fabricated fictions, another possibility of passion that is shown is that it raises compassion among others. In the last part of this novel, a warning to the ladies is added:

> And as her Misfortunes must raise Compassion in the tender Bosoms of the Young and Fair; so they may stand a lasting Caution to beware the Insinuations of the designing part of your own Sex; who having themselves lost that inestimable and never to be recover'd Jewel, *Reputation*: endeavour to destroy Blooming Innocence. . . . *Melora* cannot justly be taxed with any Miscarriage, but venturing to Act weighty things, without her Father's Knowledge. ([243], 236)

Melora's "venturing to Act weighty things, without her Father's Knowledge," is indicated as a warning for young women readers that they should not put into practice carelessly what they desire or wish but instead follow their patriarchal guardians. The heroine's tragedy seems impressed here as a female weakness in their reasonable judgement or their vulnerability to fancies or passions, which leads to the idea of their being weaker vessels and supportive idea of patriarchal or male authority. However, the warning that female passion ought to be restrained or guided by the male tutor shows disparity in this novel: male passion is also represented as the ruin of the male characters. Due to their passions, most of the main characters of both sexes are finally ruined or punished, including the cardinal spurred by his amorous passion, and his man driven by his compassion. The

distinction between passion and reason is not simply shown as those based on sexual specificity. Considering the power of fiction, female kind sympathy as "Compassion in the tender Bosoms of the Young and Fair" is ironically considered to suggest that they could be likely to fall into the danger of Melora's. As that compassion for female passionate sufferings that a male character feels causes his death, it is highly possible that Melora's "Misfortune" cannot be a warning to women readers, but a cause of their ruins. Pix's novel, in fact, suggests that women can be sexually fallen due to not only their passion but also their compassion, and that the very cause of such effect is fiction's power.

Womanly passion driven by the fiction is described as dangerous for women on the one hand, but it serves to incite emotional reactions or interest of those who read or watch it on the other hand, as female sufferings became popular on the stage of she-tragedies at the end of the seventeenth century. As Pix's warning statement shows her confidence in the women readers' compassion, passion is an important element in her production of the novel, and of her dramas as well.[18] Pix's *Inhuman Cardinal* definitely presents the features that populate epistolary novels in the Restoration period: the female narrator is represented whose body and mind are sexualised due to its passion being fermented by fictions. A warning to women readers is attributed as a reason of presenting such a female passion, which seems to emphasize that this novel has not been written for displaying woman's sensual image, but woman's sexualised body and mind is effectively shown in this novel. By introducing the idea of compassion, the novel seemingly weakens sexual distinctiveness but discloses the greater risk of passion.

III

Pix's novella indeed possesses epistolary novel's characteristic representations of female passion and fictional power related to female sexuality, but a new element of passion is introduced as (womanly) compassion, which is so influential as to inspire others' passion. Then, in order to examine different descriptions of female passion, let us consider Catharine Trotter's epistolary novel that describes passion-reason conflicts in women. Trotter—a highly educated woman on the fringe of high society—was the first among the Female Wits to publish her novella *The Adventures of a Young Lady* (later retitled as *Olinda's*

Adventures). This epistolary novel was published anonymously in 1693 when Trotter was so young (probably only fourteen years old) for such "an astonishingly mature work . . . in its restraint and poignancy" (Jacqueline Pearson 181). Olinda's letters are not love letters but those about her "amorous adventures" to Cleander, in which she writes meanness or stupidity of men who court her "in a satirical manner, usually at the expense of the male suitors" (Anne Kelley 54).

The Adventure of a Young Lady was included in *Letters of Love and Gallantry*, of which the publisher asserts the reality of Olinda and her letters in his message "To the Reader," as we have seen in the previous section. *Letters of Love and Gallantry* has an embedded structure in which the male character *of The Adventure of a Young Lady*, Cleander, as well as the real publisher, asserts the reality of the female narrator, Olinda. Cleander appears to be a receiver—the first reader—of her letters, and delivers a following message to the reader as a "real" correspondent:

> *When I received* Olinda's *Letters, I thought 'em very agreeable, and being of a Humour to love to Communicate every thing that pleases me, I have sent 'em unto the world, to try if they can meet with many of the same Tast. You have 'em as they were sent me without any Alteration but the Names. . . . When Letters are so much in Vogue, sure the Ladies can't fail of being acceptable. . . .* ("Cleander to the Reader")

This testimony of the character functions to support the publisher's affirmation of the authenticity of Olinda and her letters in order to increase sales. What is more, real and fictional persons in a nested structure use the same words as "Letters are so much in Vogue" ("To the Reader"; "Cleander to the Reader"), which makes Cleander and his message sound more actual and the publisher's words more convincing. These male figures mutually, and on a confused real-fictional level, guarantee that letters are actually written by a real woman and that the woman's act of writing can be accepted favourably. Cleander's positive assessment on Olinda's letters is presented so that it feeds his desire (in accord with publisher's) to bring these splendid epistles to the public eyes and share his pleasure with those who have good tastes in the world. As the reliability of characters becomes higher, his words become more dependable, as a result, such a male judgement more ingeniously incites readers' pride as endorsing their excellent taste in a choice of reading.

As we have seen in the previous section, by mingling reality and fiction, fictional power is enhanced so enormously that it fabricates lies to deceive others, or cause and affect others' passions. In this epistolary novel, as reality and fiction mingle in the structural level, so the power of fiction increases in its plot: letters are used to incite (female) passions. Olinda writes to one of her suitors to unmask his inconstancy "a Letter (disguising [her] Hand)" that tells a lady—a character Olinda invents—is passionately in love with him. He is readily duped by her fabrication, which is a "good sport" to her in that she could easily use such a fictional power as swaying other people to her satisfaction (30-31). She does not only trick others, but herself is tricked by the false letter fabricated by her another suitor in order to change her love from the man named Cloridon whom he thinks she loves secretly. About this letter in a letter (mentioned in Olinda's letter), she writes that her suitor "show'd me a Letter from Flanders, wherein it was told him, that Cloridon (to the great Wonder of all there) had a young Lady disguis'd in Men's Cloaths with him all the Campagne" (65).[19] By this false letter, its reader, Olida, feeling uneasy and disturbed, recounts that she is convinced of her love for Cloridon.

The deceitful fiction functions as a tool for deceiving others and for inciting their passions, as in Pix's novel. However, Olinda's passion, dissimilar to a Portuguese nun's or Pix's Melora's, is described dispassionately:

> I chang'd Colour two or three times . . . and I forc'd my self to talk of things indifferent. As soon as I was alone, I examin'd my self upon the matter. Why shou'd this trouble me. . . . In fine, I discover'd, that what I had call'd Esteem and Gratitude was Love; and I was as much asham'd of the Discovery, as if it had been known to all the World. (65-66)

Such a cool and analytical description can be attributed to the narratological structure of this novel and the idea represented by the female narrator in the letters. First, Trotter's setting is different from a conventional form of the epistolary novel in which letters are exchanged between lovers or these concerned as in *Five Love-Letters*. By writing in retrospect to the third person, not Olinda's direct passion but her objective analysis of love is depicted dispassionately. Secondly, in this novel the passion is not so connected with female sexuality that Olinda is given the exceptional capacity for reason, which seems to challenge the popular theme of the epistolary novel, that is, "the

seduction and ruin of a young innocent woman by a worldly older man" and "uncontrollable or illicit love" (Anne Kelley 54). Olinda is put into the similar situation of this conventional setting that a young woman is in love with the older man, who has honourable status and a wife. But, without suffering from this difficult situation of love, she is firmly determined not to pursue her love, nor accept Cloridon's love, but earnestly regards his friendship for her as of great importance. Then, the female passion, which leads to distress in the cases of the nun and Melora, is represented dispassionately or reasonably by the desexualisation of female passion. Through the dissociation of sexuality and love, this novel offers the possibility of dispassionate love in an inner feeling of a woman.

Contrary to the nun wavering between passion and reason, or Melora blindly following her passion, little signs of emaciated body or malfunctioned mind caused by her internalised passion is represented in this novel. She could be said to be "a young Lady disguis'd in Men's Cloaths" as many of Behn's heroines do for their love pursuit as in *The Dutch Lover* (1673), *The Town-Fopp* (1676), or *The Rovers* (1677; 1681). But what is emphasized in this novel is how strictly the heroine controls her emotions and reasonably she makes a choice of her conduct. Though asserting that she will never meet Cloridon, who earnestly begs for her love, Olinda does not reject communicating with him in letter writing:

> [W]hat happiness will it be for us, to see our selves the instruments of all the Mens becoming Good, and all the Women Wise? a more extraordinary Reformation than *Luthers*.) Let our Friendships then be so exemplary, that all may emulate, and wish to live like us; and by endeavouring, find that there's a Purer and more Solid satisfaction one moment with a Friend, than Ages thrown away upon the Gallantries, which to take up the Hearts, and steal the Hours of our Youth. (130-31)

Despite the concluding remarks of a story of a young woman's "adventure," none of the conventional endings could not be found here such as a happy marriage, an unhappy death caused by passionate love or compassionate distress. Instead, the friendship between both sexes is dispassionately declared to make each other "the instruments" to be good or wise: passion in this novel is desexualised. By restricting sexual desire and rejecting illicit love, the female narrator tries not to break the bond with him but to make their relationship desexualised.

As Anne Kelly indicates that "there is a display of female moral fibre and rationality which is equal, if not superior, to that of the male character" (73), we can find here such an amazingly rational female figure that never yields to her passion. Through questioning the ties between passion, fiction's power and female sexuality which are the traditional elements in this kind of story, the importance of reason is so emphasized that dispassionate and desexualised woman are depicted who would not let her passion be influenced by fictions. Though Trotter's work does exhibit characteristic elements of the epistolary novel as in Pix's novel, her unique representation of desexualised passion is shown by its narratological structure and its contents. Considering that Olinda's lover, older and man of honourable status, has trouble in restraining his sexual love to her, a sort of reversal of gendered roles can be found, which can also be seen in Trotter's dramatic production of heroines and their lovers (or husbands).[20] However, in spite of reversing the gender role, this woman does not necessarily try to challenge or subvert the male authority but to seek new relationship between both sexes without sexual passion.

*

While Pix's novel represents that the passion makes a female character sexualised, and, as a result, causes the ruins of herself and a male character who feels compassionate to that passion, Trotter's novel can be read to reject the passion that makes a female character sexualised. Since Manley also uses the form of epistolary novel whose key words are reality and fiction, and (female) passion and sexuality, let us lastly consider how she presents these elements or shows new possibilities concerning these elements. Her first fiction, *Letters Written by Mrs Manley* was published in 1696 and assumed to be real letters, which Manley sent to her friend in London while on her travels to Exeter.[21] As in the case of Trotter's work, its reality is emphasized by the "receiver" of her letters, who asks her to grant him permission to publish the letters in the introductory comment "*To THE Incomparably Excellent Mrs. Delarivier Manley*" as follows; "*Perhaps you may most justly object, These letters which I expose, were not proper for the Publick; the Droppings of your Pen, fatigu'd with Thought and Travel*" ([3]). His words reinforce the impression that the letters can be read as real, exchanged between the authoress and himself, as he seeks her permission to publish the letters now he has at hand.

The letters are full of the dramatic anecdotes concerning love, passion and follies, but the stories are not those of the letter writer's but these of her companions' in the same coach or inns in her travel. Though the female narrator implies some possibilities of romantic involvements between herself and the men she met during her journey, she never clearly mentions that she takes any sexual actions. Love affairs narrated in letters are not the actions put into practice in the provinces where she travels, but the past stories told by her travel companions. In a letter written on "*Saturday Night, / from Salisbury*," the narrator presents the account of a woman who was in love with a man of war but was discarded in the end:

> He swore an inviolable Love; and wou'd have contracted himself, if I durst without my Father's Consent. . . . You may conclude, we agreed upon Writing. I took my Journey, and stay'd an Aunt's House in *Exeter* Ten Days; where I heard, that within Four of my Departure, my Lover return'd; and in Three more was publickly married to my Rival. I writ to thank him for ridding me of a Knavish Husband, wish'd him Joy, took Caoch, and resolv'd against too easily believing any Man again. ([49], 42-[50], 43)

This woman's story of her love affair involves a pattern of Behn's heroines who could outwit their paternal figures and finally achieve the marriage with their lovers, as shown in *The Rover* or *The Feign'd Curtizans* (1679). Contrary to these conventional happy endings in such comedies, the female storyteller of this anecdote is brought to a miserable fate in which the comic characters in the subplot, like mistresses or fops, are usually settled. The woman whose amorous story was quoted in the letter was at a risk of being sexually and socially ruined, like Pix's Melora, by her passionate rashness in making a promise of marriage without her father's consent. But the relationship between such passion and female sexuality will not be considered or described in detail. The woman letter writer, who has just detailed the story of a woman betrayed by her unfaithful lover, indifferently changes the topic, without a single word about the woman's unhappiness and her sad story:

> The Post has just brought me a Letter from you: I find you curse me with the Continuation of *Egham*-Uneasiness, till I return to (the World in) *London*. . . . General *Talmash's* Body was brought in here this Evening: His Secretary I am acquainted with, and have sent to desire the Favour of his Company to Morrow to Dinner;

> and if any thing in his Relation be Entertaining, you shall not fail of it from
>
> *Your Sincere Faithful Servant.* ([50], 43-[51], 44)

The subject is changed into the news about the body of General Thomas Talmash, an English general who died in Plymouth in June 1694 when Manley actually travelled, which must have been the current topic at the time. By mentioning the real person and actual event, the reality of what is written in letters is heightened, namely, the woman's amorous adventure looks as real as General's death. This is a similar way we could see in the novels by Pix and Trotter in which fictions mixed with reality can present female passions—Pix's compassion and Trotter's dispassion—more realistic or convincing to its readers. Manley's *Letters* indeed illustrates the subjects of women's love relationships from a female narrator's perspective in the conventional course of story. However, the narrator does not show any womanly compassion to the female storyteller who is sexualised by her passion as in Pix's novel, nor dispassionately give any advices to a woman who is captured by her passion as in Trotter's novel. Manley, as well as other Female Wits, utilizes the popular features of the epistolary novel that foreground female sexuality, but her novel shows its detachment of female passion from female sexuality, despite presenting the bond between them. In contrast to the novels of Pix and Trotter, this Manley's text shows little awareness questioning the problems of the relationship between female passion and sexuality. Female irrational behaviour caused by her blind passion is represented, but its description is not accompanied with criticism on female irrationality or sympathy for woman's misery.

One of the reasons why her fiction depicts female passion, though it is no longer presented as problematic, might not be unrelated to the popularity of discourses concerning female passion. Such discourses can be seen in various forms of texts which confuse facts and fictions to describe women's passion and sexuality, as in the much-loved periodical: the *Athenian Mercury*, which asserts that these subjects are sent by the readers as their real worries or concerns, discusses female passion and sexuality in relation to social conventions.[22] As are shown in this journal, many of scandalous sexual deeds and thoughts—whether real or fictional—are frequently exposed to the public eyes, but its popularity suggests that readers seek what is written in the stories of not true-life, not perfectly fabricated, but mixed with both.

Manley's epistolary novel indeed presents (its attention to) female passion and sexuality, but does not give any clear moral caution.[23] To attract readers' interest and amuse their curiosities, the writer's moral judgement is unnecessary, to be precise, hindrance. The narrator's attitude of nonchalance towards (female) sexuality or judgement on it is frequently found in the stories of amorous passion: "She entertain'd us all the Morning with a story Love-business about her Second Husband; Stuff so impertinent, I remember nothing of it" ([34], 27). When the narrator reports frivolous romance to which she shows little interest, though this novel on the whole is configurated by these stories, her safe distance from not only its storyteller but also story itself is indicated. This female narrator's distance to the storytellers is similar to that of the Restoration comedies' heroes or heroines (or playwrights) that make fun of ill-bred fools with sarcastic eyes. The narrator does laugh but does not make an accusation without (com) passion or dispassion. Too passionate—either compassionate or dispassionate—representations should be considered to be fake like dramatic representations fabricated to inflame readers' / audience's internalised passion.

While Pix's Melora is definitely identified as a dramatic heroine in tragedy, and Trotter's Olinda is too virtuous heroine to be real for her strictness, Manley's female narrator leaves their emotional reactions to readers' own judgement, and therefore, can be thought to share their antipathy or empathy for the passions' reality and absurdity. Manley's *Letters* undoubtedly describes the female passion, but does not pose a question about its relationship with reason or sexuality. Utilizing the form of epistolary novels in its confusing of fictionality with reality, we can find in this novel the narrator's neutral voice that does not judge female passion and sexuality as well. So, this voice can differentiate female body and mind expressing their disconnection to female sexuality, though they are inevitably related to sexual matters.

IV

Thanks to Aphra Behn's success in the male-dominated commercial worlds of theatre and publication, changes of the situation around women writers were caused: women writers could gain more opportunities to create and publish their works in the last decade of seventeenth century London, when the Female Wits were encouraged to publish their novels by the then literary vogue and the publishers.

Female sexuality, which was Behn's most important theme, is likewise important for the Female Wits, but their representations are different from Behn's and from each others' as well. As their first attempts to depict female sexuality and publish their creations, the characteristics of the epistolary novel can be useful in its confusion of reality and fiction. *Five Love-Letters* describes how fiction causes female passion—passionate suffering between love and reason—and, as a result, makes women's body and mind sexualised, when fictions came to be adversely regarded to have a hármful influence on women readers' sexuality. The popularity of it can be attributed to its representations of sexualised women narrators and fictional power facilitating female passion.

At the time when *Five Love-Letters* enjoyed its popularity, the Female Wits utilize the form and features of the epistolary novel in their first works, in which different relations among female passion, sexuality and fictions are depicted. Mary Pix's *The Inhumane Cardinal* presents that fictions create female passions, which are closely related to female sexuality, and that female sexualised passions have an influential impact on the others to incite compassions. Catharine Trotter's *The Adventure of a Young Lady* also presents the possibility that the passion could be connected to (female) sexuality by fictions, but the female passion is disconnected from female sexuality, as it is finally made dispassionate and, as a result, the female narrator is desexualised. Delarivier Manley's *Letters* does not include compassionate or dispassionate representations of female passion, but exhibits its neutral viewpoint that makes a passionate female body and mind disconnected to female sexuality.

In the last decade of the seventeenth century, people began to gain some information—whether factual or fictional—from (pre-) journalistic or popular publications, as Cecile M. Jagodzinski suggests that "authors, publishers, and readers were well aware of the power of the printed word to reveal the truth, to discover new facts and whole new lands" (131). This sort of "truth" or "facts" should not be accepted literally, considering how the discourse or concepts were circulated, to be precise, fictionally produced, as the persuasive power of words is strengthened by a mixture of fact and fiction. Under these circumstances, the Female Wits present female passion and sexuality making use of the fictional form and contents of the epistolary novel in quite different manners. When women writers could have the very good chances to make creative activities, they ingeniously capitalized

on the vogue for literary genre and popular subjects among readers and themselves.

Notes

1. On a whorish image, Catherine Gallagher suggests Behn's intentional usage of "author-whore persona" (14), which Derek Hughes rebuts in "The Masked Woman Revealed" by pointing out misreading or factual errors of her argument.

2. Prior to *Oroonoko*, Southerne dramatised Behn's other fiction *The History of the Nun* into *The Fatal Marriage, or the Innocent Adultery* (1694), which was so successful that it was revived several times.

3. As for the appearance of these female newcomers, the theatrical plight caused by the separation of the United Company into two rival troupes in 1695 has been often pointed out (Susan Staves 108). It must be true that the 1695/96 season could offer a chance for new and / or women playwrights to be hired.

4. It is a sort of conventional way "to appeal to male chivalry and female sympathy" by emphasizing female inferiority in writing in order to avoid becoming an enemy to male playwrights, but Behn's appeal could be made to highlight the "novelty of *woman* playwright" (Paula R. Backscheider 247).

5. Pix presented her poem to the printed text of Manley's second play, *The Royal Mischief* (acted at Lincoln's Inn Fields in May 1696), which was put on the stage soon after *The Lost Lover* and well received. Not only Pix but Trotter did present her verse to the same text, and to Trotter's *Agnes de Castro* (published in 1696) Manley returned her poem (*Agnes de Castro*, 2). In *The Nine Muses* (1700), a collaborative work as an elegy for Dryden by women writers, all these three contributed their poems.

6. As for comedies, "her [Pix's] comedies, much less dark and much more genial than Behn's, became the model for the extremely successful comedies of her friend and protégée, Centlivre" (Susan Staves 117). Susanna Centlivre may be regarded as a successor to Behn who wrote almost exclusively comedies, as Nancy Copeland compares their comedies and stresses their similarities in her *Staging Gender in Behn and Centlivre*.

7. As a reaction to such female playwrights' outbreak or forwardness, an anonymous play, *The Female Wits* (acted in September 1696), was presented soon after their debuts. This play, ridiculing these three authoresses, won popularity to some extent, as it was staged for six days. In this drama, Manley is most severely attacked by being depicted as a proud and malicious woman playwright who tempts and utilizes men. Trotter is made fun of for being a pseudo-critic, and Pix's real bodily image is maliciously shown as a fat authoress so much in love with alcohol.

8. It can be said that they attempted to write fictional letters along the lines of Behn, since Behn in her later career published epistolary novels in three volumes as *Love-Letters between the Noble Man and His Sister* (1684; 1685; 1687). This

work did have an influence on them, as Manley would adapt it for her greatest hit, *The New Atalantis* (1709). But the Female Wits' first novels were different from this genre of roman à clef or the satire denouncing the political and sexual behaviours of real persons of quality.

[9] Jacqueline Pearson devotes a chapter of "The Female Wits" to discuss similarities or differences among these playwrights' works, focusing on their representations of female figures (169-201). Susan Staves indicates "the unique phenomenon of the 1695/96 season" (108) and considers "small groups of mutually supportive women writers" by examining their plays: Trotters's *Fatal Friendship*, Manley's *Royal Mischief* and Pix's *Beau Defeated*. However, their first epistolary novels came to be paid attention recently, for instance, by Sonia Villegas-López in reconsidering the relationship between the genre and female writers in the Restoration period.

[10] Its publisher Samuel Briscoe brought out many works by women like Behn's complete works (1698) or Trotter's first drama, *Agnes de Castro* (1696). He also (re)printed such dramatic texts of Restoration comedies as Thomas Southerne's *Wives Excuse* (1692), William Wycherley's *The Country Wife* (1695) and John Vanbrugh's *The Relapse* (1697; 1698).

[11] A similar situation can be true of the popular periodical such as the *Athenian Mercury*, which brought out the discussions on female curiosities even concerning illegal sexual desire or behaviours in the form of questions and answers, though it remains suspicious whether such questions were really sent from female readers or the male editors fabricated them for attracting the readers' interest. However, discourses on female sexuality, sometimes against social conventions, were published and circulated, no matter how real or fictional they were.

[12] Its great popularity could be found in the fact that different versions of *Five Love-Letters* were incessantly produced. Its publisher Henry Brome not only issued a reprint in 1680 but also brought out *Seven Portuguese Letters from a Nun to a Cavalier* in 1681. *Five Love-Letters* was reprinted by other publishers: R. Bentley (1686; 1693), R. Wellington (1701; 1714), and M.W. (1716). Furthermore, *Five Love Letters Written by a Cavalier in answer to the Five Love-Letters Written to Him by a Nun* was printed by R. Bentley in 1683 and by R. Wellington in 1694 and 1700.

[13] The notion of solitude or peace, which is usually in contrast to that of worldly bustle, is one of the key ideas in the letters. We can see these ideas in Manley's and Trotter's letters as follows: "The Resolutions I have taken of quitting *London* (which is as much as to say, the World) for ever" (Manley, *Letters*, [8],1, sig. B); "I sometime prefer Solitude even to the best, and that I had now retir'd to avoid the World" (Trotter, *The Adventure of a Young Lady*, 47).

[14] Closet is one of the tools in comedies for wife's adultery or daughter's secret marriage, as in *The Country Wife* (1675) or Thomas Durfey's *A Fond Husband* (1677). For example, a father or a husband sometimes confines his daughter or wife into her private room or closet for protecting her chastity. Such confinement seems to remove his worry on the one hand, but it could give a woman the space of her own on the other hand, which often enables her to enjoy her love affairs without being invaded by her father or husband.

[15] Though no author's name is appended on the title page of the novel, it was

attributed to Pix, since it was printed by the same John Harding who published her first play, *Ibrahim*, and, more importantly, Mary Pix wrote its dedication.

16. A number of warnings were made at the time in conduct books, as in *The Ladies Dictionary*, that such rashness usually cannot lead to a happy marriage as can the heroines' on the comic stage (470).

17. The idea that fictions like romances or love stories should have socially or sexually undesirable effects on women readers was often accepted in the latter half of the seventeenth century, as we can find such a power of fictions in Jeremy Collier's attack on the obscene performances on the stage (3-5) or the reports that women's imaginations were actually embodied on their own bodies or their babies by Sir Kenelm Digby (White 101-8).

18. On Pix's first play, *Ibrahim*, Gerarld Langbaine indicates the playwright's lack of skills in "the Harmony of Numbers, and the Sublimity of Expression." But, he cancels out these defects by her excellent representations of the heroine's passionate sufferings, as is suggested by "the Distress of *Morena* never fail'd to bring Tears into the Eyes of the Audience" (111). Compassion and sympathy of the audience—possible harmful effects on women—could be a popular device on dramatic productions at the time.

19. Disguise in clothes, especially women's cross dressing, was popular on the Restoration stage where a heroine of comedies often follows a man of her choice in a disguise and consummates her marriage. Some ladies in man's clothes even fight as a man in Behn's comedies, as in *The Feign'd Curtizans*. Trotter and Manley also utilize some versions of disguise by female characters in their novels.

20. As for her representation of reversal of gendered roles, *The Revolution of Sweden* (performed in 1706), presents a virtuous and ideal female figure that loses her life for the public safety of the country, while her husband has caused the social disorder due to his unreasonable ambition. Or, a dispassionate woman is found at the ending of her only comedy, *Love at a Loss* (acted in 1700), in which she decides her husband by her friends' vote.

21. According to *DNB*, "from 1694 to 1696 Manley travelled around the south-west of England; a series of eight letters composed during these travels to one 'J.H.'." In the opening of Manley's *Letters*, J. H., an addressee of her letters and a friend of her father, advances his opinion to this up and coming writer that he cannot agree with her "*Design of Writing Plays*," much less "*that of Making them Publick*" ([4]), but it is slightly doubtful that this is meant honestly. Such a publisher's marketing publicity for this newly entered authoress is expressed in his approval of producing dramas that he has "*thought this one Way, by giving the Town a true Taste of your Thoughts and Sense; I say, a true Taste*" ([5]). We have seen the same comment in the introductory text to Trotter's novella.

22. The *Athenian Mercury* began to be published twice a week in 1691 and its questions-and-answers form would make it widely popular at many coffee houses for seven years, quite a long run in the period. Urmi Bhowmik mentions then sensations created by the journal's mixed employment of facts and norms: public attention to the *Athenian Mercury* was indeed attracted, as in 1693 some plays criticizing this journal appeared like *New Athenian Comedy*. Many magazines were consecutively published with "Mercury" carried in its titles, like *London Mercury*, later *Lacedemonian Mercury*. The *Athenian Mercury* itself was compiled into the best edition and published by Andrew Bell as *The Athenian*

Oracle (1703-28).

[23] The *Athenian Mercury* devotes much space (many pages) to the problems of or worries on the boundary of moralistic / immoralistic behaviour between lovers. Above all, for women, the most highly crucial thing is how to behave carefully before marriage. For example, a question is "sent by a woman"—or fabricated by male editors—about how far she can comply with "Attempts against her [women's] Honour." To this, such an answer that "[t]he securest way is to avoid your Seducer, nor can you prudently admit of any intimacy with him after" is in fact useless for her, since the expected answer is to what extent she can satisfy her lover's sexual demand (12, 16 [December 16. 1693]). This answer seems to be a warning but it avoids a clear answer to her question by replying in oblique style. As a result, the same questions are repeatedly sent to the journal or similar questions are further asked on numerous occasions, which eventually makes a large part of the journal filled with these topics concerning sexual matters.

Bibliography

Ariadne. *She Ventures and He Wins.* In *Female Playwrights of the Restoration Five Comedies.* Eds. Paddy Lyons and Fidelis Morgan. 1991; Vermont: Everyman, 1994. 104-59.

Backscheider, Paula R. "Women Writers and the Chains of Identification." *Studies in the Novel* 19. 3 (1987): 245-62.

Ballaster, Ros. *Seductive Forms: Women's Amatory Fiction from 1684 to 1740.* Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992.

Behn, Aphra. *The Works of Aphra Behn.* Ed. Janet Todd. 7vols. Columbus: Ohio State UP, 1992-96.

Bhowmik, Urmi. "Facts and Norms in the Marketplace of Print: John Dunton's *Athenian Mercury.*" *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 36 (2003): 345-65.

Blant, Clare. "Varieties of Women's Writing." In *Women and Literature in Britain 1700-1800.* Ed. Vivien Jones. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2000. 285-305.

Collier, Jeremy. *A Short View of the Immorality and Profaneness of the English Stage.* New York: AMS P, 1974.

Copeland, Nancy. *Staging Gender in Behn and Centlivre: Women's Comedy and the Theatre.* Ashgate: Aldershot, 2004.

Dunton, John. *The Athenian Gazette, or Casuistical Mercury.* London, 1691-97.

Female *Wits, The.* In *The Female Wits: Women Playwrights of the Restoration.* Ed. Fidelis Morgan. 1981; London: Virago, 1992. 390-433.

Gallagher, Catherine. *Nobody's Story: The Vanishing Acts of Women Writers in the Marketplace 1670-1820.* Berkeley: U of California P, 1994.

Hughes, Derek. "The Masked Woman Revealed: or, the Prostitute and the Playwright in Aphra Behn Criticism." *Women's Writing* 7. 2 (2000): 149-64.

---, et al, eds. *Eighteenth-Century Women Playwrights*, vol. 2. London: Pickering & Chatto, 2001.

Jagodzinski, Cecile M. *Privacy and Print: Reading and Writing in Seventeenth-Century England.* Charlottesville and London: UP of Virginia, 1999.

Kelley, Anne. *Catharine Trotter: An Early Modern Writer in the Vanguard of Feminism*. Ashgate: Aldershot, 2002.

Kendall, I. ed. *Love and Thunder: Plays by Women in the Age of Queen Anne*. London: Methuen, 1988.

Ladies Dictionary, The. Being a General Entertainment For the Fair Sex. London, 1694.

Langbaine, Gerard. *The Lives and Characters of the English Dramatick Poets*. London, 1699.

L'Estrange, Roger, trans. *Five Love-Letters from a Nun to a Cavalier*. Cambridge: Chadwyck-Healey, 1997.

Manley, Delarivier. *The Royal Mischief*. In *Eighteenth-Century Women Playwrights*, vol.1. Eds. Derek Huges et al. London: Pickering & Chatto, 2001. 43-104.

---. *Letters Written by Mrs. Manley*. In *The Selected Works of Delarivier Manley*, vol.1. Ed. Rachel Carnell. London: Pickering & Chatto, 2005. 53-79.

Newcomb, Lori Humphrey. "Prose Fiction." In *The Cambridge Companion to Early Modern Women's Writing*. Ed. Laura Lunger Knoppers. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2009. 272-86.

Pearson, Jacqueline. *The Prostituted Muse: Images of Women & Women Dramatists 1642-1737*. New York: St. Martin's, 1988.

Pix, Mary. *Ibrahim, the Thirteenth Emperour of the Turks*. Cambridge: Chadwyck-Healey, 1994.

---. *The Inhuman Cardinal, or, Innocence Betray'd. A Novel*. Cambridge: Chadwyck-Healey, 1997.

Staves, Susan. *A Literary History of Women's Writing in Britain, 1660-1789*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2006.

Trotter, Catharine. *Agnes de Castro*. Cambridge: Chadwyck-Healey, 1994.

---. *The Adventure of a Young Lady*. In *Catharine Trotter's The Adventures of a Young Lady and Other Works*. Ed. Anne Kelly. Ashgate: Aldershot, 2006. 1-141.

Villegas-López, Sonia. "Narrative of Truth-Telling in the Making of the English Novel: William Congreve's *Incognita* and Mary Pix's *The Inhumane Cardinal*." In *The Female Wits: Women and Gender in Restoration Literature and Culture*. Eds. Pilar Guder-Domínguez, Zenón Luis-Martínez and Juan A. Prieto-Pablos. Huelva: Universidad de Huelva, 2006. 207-29.

---. "Devising a New Heroine: Catharine Trotter's *Olinda's Adventures* and the Rise of the Novel Reconsidered." In *Re-shaping the Genres: Restoration Women Writers*. Eds. Zenón Luis-Martínez and Jorge Figueroa-Dorrego. Bern: Peter Lang, 2003. 261-78.

White, R. *A Late Discourse made in a Solemn Assembly of Nobles and Learned men at* Montpellier in France, By Sir Kenelm Digby, Kt. &c.: *Touching the Cure of Wounds by the* Powder of Sympathy. London, 1664.